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SUBJECT: "TECHNOCRAT" PRESIDENT RUNS INTO TROUBLE AT
AL-AZHAR UNIVERSITY

Classified By: Pol/C Norm Olsen for reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

1. (C) Summary: An angry mob of students, reportedly stirred up by remnants of the previous, Arafat-appointed administration, chased the new al-Azhar University president, Dr. Hani al-Nijim, from his campus office February 28 in response to al-Nijim's announced plan to uphold long-ignored university standards and policies, including on tuition and fees. Classes are suspended while the university board weighs a date to re-open. Al-Azhar, sometimes characterized as the "Fatah" or secular university, faces, like many Fatah-linked institutions, increasing competition for prestige with its chief rival, the Islamic University of Gaza. Although at least one board member expressed his confidence that the conflict will be resolved, the type of troubles experienced by Dr. al-Nijim seem likely to recur in other arenas as Fatah responds to its embarrassing defeats by Islamists in January local elections in several Gaza strip municipalities, and gears up for more elections in coming months. End Summary.

Cleaning up al-Azhar

2. (C) Dr. Hani al-Nijim, appointed February 15 as the president of largely secular al-Azhar University in Gaza City, was reportedly driven from his office by a mob of rioting students the evening of February 28 after an earlier announcement that he intended to actively implement long-standing university standards and policies. According to al-Azhar Board of Trustees member Ahmad Mousa, al-Nijim was having trouble from the get-go, as he attempted to impose a more formal relationship between his office and the students. Under the former university president, PLO Executive Committee member Riad el-Khoudary, Mousa continued, the students, in particular the student council, had exerted what Mousa called in his March 1 conversation with Poloff "significant influence" over decisions affecting the university. In particular, Mousa cited students being exempted from paying fees and tuition, as well as being awarded diplomas without having completed course requirements.

3. (C) While reports in the Israeli media portrayed the February 28 events as an armed mob of Fatah-affiliated students attempting to "lynch" the new president, Mousa painted instead a picture of a beleaguered technocrat empowered by President Abbas to end an era of chaos and declining standards under the previous, Arafat-appointed president. He said the conflict had been instigated by Hazem Isqag, dean of the Continuing Education faculty and a relative of ousted president el-Khoudary. Unhappy with the uniform and more stringent policies being imposed by the new president, and reportedly in fear that he would lose his position, Mousa said, Isqag mobilized students in his department by telling them that the new president would not allow them to receive their diplomas. Several hundred students then went on a rampage, Mousa said, vandalizing several university offices and calling for the president to resign. Riot police eventually quelled the mob, and the president and the board suspended Isqag pending a full investigation of his role in the incident. Mousa said that the Board intends to re-open the university in several days, so as not to penalize the entire student body (currently on vacation) for the actions of students in a single faculty.

Board Claims Abu Mazen Support

4. (C) Unlike in the Arafat era, when those with strong Fatah credentials and often little else to recommend them were appointed to public office, and organizations like the Board of Trustees were little more the "rubber stamps," Mousa said, President Abbas supported the board's decision to retire then-president el-Khoudary, and had freed the board to decide on his replacement based on merit (Note: El-Khoudary was reportedly appointed subsequently to a senior position in the PLO education department. End note). Calling el-Khoudary "inefficient," the board was unanimous in voting his ouster and also united in its support of al-Nijim, a

veteran board member who is reportedly widely recognized as being technically competent and in possession of a "clean reputation."

15. (C) Al-Nijim and his top aide, Mazen Hamada, would not comment directly to Emboffs on the February 28 events, saying only that they awaited the results of the board's investigation. Al-Nijim flatly told PD officer March 2 that, "I do not know about politics -- I know about academics," and stressed that he intends to run the university "in proper order, according to regulations." Mousa said that in its letter of appointment, the board had specifically entrusted to al-Nijim responsibility and authority to carry out all university rules and procedures, as well to put an end to nepotism.

Situation Requires A Certain Leniency, But....

16. (SBU) Krister Nordahl, UNRWA program director in Gaza, confirmed that virtually all educational institutions in Gaza, including those run by UNRWA, have been under increasing pressure during the four years of the Intifada to be lenient with students, many of whom have extreme difficulty in getting to their place of study because of internal closures. Nordahl said that most institutions in Gaza recognize the need to bestow a certain latitude on students unable to meet course requirements because of closures or other movement-restricting events outside their control. Mousa and others familiar with the level of education at the university described a system that abused that latitude to the benefit of well-connected students and to the detriment of the educational standards of the institution.

Declining Standards, Declining Prestige

17. (SBU) Comment: Although the universities do not fit neatly into a political line-up, with a broad brush, al-Azhar is viewed as being secular or "Fatah," and the Islamic University of Gaza (IUG) is viewed as being Islamist or "Hamas." Embassy education experts have increasingly noted over the course of this Intifada a sense within al-Azhar that its once-unique prestige is increasingly rivaled by IUG, which has been both more creative in adopting compensatory measures such as distance learning, and more bold in modernizing its curriculum (Note: IUG, for example, teaches its business administration courses in English, from U.S. textbooks).

Burnishing a Tarnished Image

18. (C) Comment cont'd: The appointment of al-Nijim and the subsequent challenge to his authority by remnants of the Arafat-appointed cadre at the university appear a microcosm of what lies ahead for those interested in "cleaning up" the image of both the PA and Fatah. Ahmad Mousa was expansive in his conversation with Poloff, depicting a board interested in exercising a new-found freedom to use its judgment for the good of the institution under President Abbas and shedding its "rubber-stamp" reputation. Although at least one board member expressed confidence that the conflict will be resolved, the types of troubles experienced by Dr. al-Nijim seem likely to recur in other arenas as Fatah responds to its embarrassing defeats by Islamists in January local elections in several municipalities in the Gaza Strip, and gears up for more elections in coming months.

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